Book of Mormon

The Tame and Wild Olive Trees—

An Allegory of Our Savior's Love

By Ralph E. Swiss

Most of Christianity has yet to learn of Zenos's allegory of the olive trees. Indeed, if it hadn't been for the combined efforts of four prophets, separated by thousands of years, the allegory might have been lost entirely. The prophet Zenos wrote it in Israel, Nephi's younger brother Jacob retold it to the Nephites, Mormon preserved it for latter-day readers, and Joseph Smith translated it into English.

The story as we have it was originally contained on the plates of brass, which are not available to us today. Jacob, however, engraved the story on the small plates of Nephi. Even then, the allegory might not have reached us. Most of the Book of Mormon is an abridgment by Mormon of the large plates of Nephi. Martin Harris lost the translation of the first part of the abridgment. To replace the lost history, the Lord directed Joseph Smith to translate the small plates, which Mormon had included with his abridgment.

I first gained a great appreciation for the allegory of the olive trees while attending an in-service class as a young seminary teacher. I discovered that the allegory was not so much a story about trees, branches, grafting, and fruit as a wonderful witness of the messiahship of Christ and his love for mankind.

Reviewing the record that precedes Jacob 5 can give us some insights into Zenos's purpose in writing and Jacob's purpose in retelling the allegory. Nephi first tells of his family's flight from Jerusalem and their travels through the wilderness and across the open seas. After arriving in the New World, both Nephi and Jacob sought to reinforce the doctrines of Christ with their people. Perhaps this was one reason they drew so heavily on the prophecies of Isaiah and Zenos concerning Israel and the promise of a Messiah. (See 1 Ne. 19:24; 2 Ne. 6:5.)

Nephi sought to instill a testimony of Christ in his people, and so he not only reached back to the great writings of Isaiah on the Savior (see 1 Ne. 19:23), but also centered his own teachings on Jesus Christ. He wrote, "We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our

children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins." (2 Ne. 25:26.)

Before Nephi died, he committed the small plates to Jacob, instructing him to record only what was precious—sacred preaching, great revelation, or prophecy for Christ's sake. (See Jacob 1:2–4.) In keeping with this charge, Jacob taught his people to have faith in the Savior:

"For this intent have we written these things, that they may know that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundreds of years before his coming. …

"Wherefore, we search the prophets, and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy." (Jacob 4:4, 6. Hereafter, scriptural references will be from Jacob unless otherwise indicated.)

In focusing on Christ, Jacob included in his writings the allegory of the tame and wild olive trees. The use of the story may have been prompted by Jacob's discussion of the Jew's rejection of Jesus Christ. Jacob spoke of the Jews as "stiffnecked," as "despising words of plainness," as "seeking for things they could not understand." (Jacob 4:14.) He told of a time when they would reject the sure foundation of Christ. The allegory was probably an answer to the question, How can the house of Israel ever build upon that foundation after having rejected it? (See Jacob 4:15–18.) We do not know whether Jacob quoted Zenos's allegory completely, but what he did quote was sufficient to answer such a question.

As Zenos begins the story, he defines the primary figure: the tame olive tree, which he said represents the house of Israel. He then speaks of the tree growing old and beginning to decay. From the opening verses, the love and concern of the master of the garden are evident as he seeks ways to help the tree survive and bear good fruit. (Jacob 5:4.) The lord of the vineyard and his servants may refer to the Lord Jesus Christ and his disciples, the prophets; at least Jacob seems to refer to them as such when he explains the implications of the allegory. (See Jacob 6:2–4, 8.) Others, noting that the lord of the vineyard has a chief servant working in the vineyard, assign the role of lord of the vineyard to God the Father.

It is possible to recognize the good fruit of the tree as those people bringing forth good works, and the bad fruit as those bringing forth evil works. (See Jacob 6:7.) We can also imagine that the wild olive tree represents the Gentiles, just as the tame olive tree represents the house of Israel.

From the beginning of the story, a time line begins to unfold, and we naturally wonder which events in history might correspond with events in the allegory. Herein we need to be cautious. Matching events in

Israel's history is not as important as witnessing, by means of the story, the great love of the Lord for his vineyard and his carefully laid plan to gather in the good fruit. However, it is interesting to consider possible historical parallels.

The allegory seems to divide into seven scenes, each scene covering a period of time. Zenos also identifies five locations in the vineyard, which represents the world. (See Jacob 6:3.) Examining each scene in order can prove quite helpful in following the unfolding events.

Scene 1 (Jacob 5:4–6): The story opens at a time of growing decay, perhaps such a time as the period following the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon when the glory of Israel was greatly lessened by growing wickedness and evil. In hopes of saving the tree, the master of the vineyard prunes the decayed limbs, digs about the trunk, and nourishes the soil to stimulate new growth. After caring for the tree, he waits many days to see the results of his labor.

The tree begins to put forth some new and tender branches. These branches seem to represent the righteous of the day. Even in the midst of Israel's apostasy, such prophets as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lehi came to lead the people, and some of the Israelites turned to the Lord. But even though the master is encouraged by the new growth, he notices that the main top begins to perish.

Scene 2 (Jacob 5:7–14): The master grieves for the tree and directs his servants to pluck off the decayed branches and cast them into the fire. Twice more, in verses 11 and 13 (Jacob 5:11, 13), the master expresses his grief at losing the tree and its fruit. Christ's great love for his people is clear as he sorrows at their loss.

One era in Israel's history that reflects such a condition occurred during the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests of Israel. After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel divided into two kingdoms. First, the mighty nation of Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom, carrying off many of the inhabitants of Israel. Then Babylon conquered the Southern Kingdom and burned Jerusalem, taking captive most of the people in the city. Only a few thousand returned to Jerusalem seventy years later. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah paid dearly for their disobedience—the dead limbs several times cast into the fire is an apt analogy.

Yet the master of the vineyard prepared for the future. In the allegory, he carries some of the young and tender branches to the nethermost parts of the vineyard and grafts them onto other trees. This could represent the Lord's effort to preserve the blood of Israel should the main tree die: "If it so be that the root of this tree will perish, I may preserve the fruit thereof." (Jacob 5:8.) Those carried off by Assyria to

the north and those carried off to Babylon might be some of these branches. The Lehites and Mulekites, who were led from Israel to the New World about the same time, might be other branches.

The master also commands his servants to graft the branches from a wild olive tree onto the old tree, then dig about and nourish the tree. Since limbs gather sunlight and air for the tree, strong branches can strengthen a dying tree. Similarly, for example, Assyria brought non-Israelites into the Northern Kingdom, who adopted the religion of Israel. These people became known as the Samaritans.

Scene 3 (Jacob 5:15–28): After a long time has passed, the master returns to examine the fruit of the vineyard. This time, he finds that the tame olive tree has borne tame fruit despite the wild branches that grew from its trunk. The great strength of the roots has overpowered the wildness of the branches. Perhaps this corresponds to the tremendous growth of the Church during and after the Savior's mortal ministry. A great many among the Gentiles, including numerous Samaritans, were converted and lived the gospel as though they had been born of Israel.

At this time, the allegory reveals where in the vineyard the tender branches from scene 2 had been grafted. The first bundle of branches had been moved to an area that the servants called the poorest spot in all the vineyard, yet the branches had brought forth good fruit. The master identifies the second spot, saying that it was even poorer than the first, yet those branches had also borne good fruit. It seems that the Lord was able to bring forth righteous people in wicked lands, to the surprise of his servants.

There is little in the allegory to identify these poor spots of ground, but the scriptures do supply some possible candidates. Jonah, for example, was astonished at the repentance of the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria (see Jonah 3–4), which was generally considered a spiritual desert by the Israelites. Similarly, a faithful branch of Jews lived in Babylon while the Jews were captive there, and Babylon could be called worse than Nineveh. (See Ezra 1–5.) The master identifies a third spot, which had also been fruitful. The fourth spot was good ground, and the master had nourished the tree there a long time, but the branches had brought forth good and bad fruit, much like the Nephites and Lamanites in the promised land. Instead of destroying the bad branches, the master decides to nourish the tree a little longer.

Scene 4 (Jacob 5:29–49): When the master returns again, he finds the entire vineyard in decay. The trees have produced much fruit, but none of it is good. The tame olive tree has all sorts of fruit, and the bad branches of the fourth tree have overpowered the good branches until the good has withered away. This scene is much like the condition of the earth during the great apostasy. In many lands, including ancient

America, the gospel was lost entirely; in others, Christianity had fragmented into a multitude of differing sects and doctrines.

Throughout the verses of this scene, we can sense the master's anguish over the loss of his trees. After he views all the trees, he weeps, then repeatedly asks his servants, "What could I have done more for my vineyard?" (Jacob 5:41. See also Jacob 5:47, 49.) At one point, he says:

"Have I slackened mine hand, that I have not nourished it? Nay, I have nourished it, and I have digged about it, and I have pruned it, and I have dunged it; and I have stretched forth mine hand almost all the day long, and the end draweth nigh." (5:47.)

Scene 5 (Jacob 5:50–74): The master's decision to spare the vineyard a little longer shows even more clearly his desire for the salvation of the trees and their fruits. He knows the roots of the tame olive tree are still alive. So, to preserve the roots and again bring forth good fruit, he and his servant begin to restore the natural branches to their parent trees, destroying the worst of the branches to make room.

Like the gathering of Israel in modern times, all the branches of the tame olive tree are grafted back onto their parent tree. The master instructs his servant to trim back the bad branches as good fruit grows, "that the root and top may be equal in strength, until the good shall overcome the bad." (Jacob 5:66.) The servant finds other servants to work with him, and though the laborers are few, they toil with their might to preserve the vineyard.

Scene 6 (Jacob 5:75–76): When the master finally reviews the vineyard, he finds "that his fruit was good, and that his vineyard was no more corrupt." (Jacob 5:75.) He blesses his servants, and they look forward to laying up the fruit of the vineyard for a long time. Such a period of peace and bounteous harvest could correspond to the Millennium. Even so, the master warns his servants that this is the last time they will work in the vineyard, speaking of the season to come.

Scene 7 (Jacob 5:77): The master refers to the time when evil fruit will again come into the vineyard. He says that at that time, he will separate the good from the evil, like the final cleansing of the earth:

"The good will I preserve unto myself, and the bad will I cast away into its own place. And then cometh the season and the end; and my vineyard will I cause to be burned with fire."

As Jacob concludes the recital of Zenos's allegory, he stresses that the Lord will set his hand to recover his people, that the servants of the Lord will go forth with power to nourish and prune the vineyard until the end comes. Then how blessed will be those who have labored

diligently in the vineyard, and how cursed will be those who are cast out! (See Jacob 6:2–3.)

Recalling the mercy of God, who "stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long" (Jacob 6:4), Jacob again exhorts his people not to reject the words of the prophets concerning Christ. In both Jacob and Zenos's words is another testament that Jesus is the Christ, that he has great love for all of God's children, and that he works tirelessly to preserve the righteous and to accomplish his purposes on the earth, which are to bring to pass our immortality and eternal life.

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